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Rockridge Institute

The Strategic Framing Overview

by The Rockridge Institute

Strategic Framing is an effort to revitalize progressive discourse by reframing progressive policies in ways that speak to shared American values.

Conservatives have realized that individual issues need to be linked to an overall moral and ethical perspective. They have seen how issues fit together and they have created a language of conservatism that reflects their values. In the process, they have appropriated fundamental American virtues, such as freedom and compassion, and have given them conservative definitions. They have trained their advocates, policymakers, and media spokespersons in the use of this language to move public discourse in a conservative direction. They have successfully reframed issue after issue to make their language the everyday language of much of America.

Meanwhile, progressives have been hampered by a focus on specific issues, rather than the overall moral and ethical perspective that justifies specific policy choices. Consequently, progressives have been unable to communicate how each issue fits into a coherent set of values, so they have lost the fight for a language that resonates with the American public.

On issue after issue, media framings have conservative implications. For example, the market is currently framed metaphorically as a force of nature,

as something not to be "tinkered with" or "regulated." In the face of a force of nature, one can only be "flexible" and "adjust." But in reality, the market is a social institution with rules and regulating mechanisms that have been put in place by human beings. But this reality is hidden by the force-of-nature framing.

Similarly, education is metaphorically framed in terms of economics and market forces, schools are seen as businesses producing products and teachers become "educational resources." This metaphor imposes the idea of "productivity" and competition on schools, so that costs are to be minimized and the use of technology for mass education (e.g., computers, videotapes, standardized curricula, and so on) is to be maximized. It follows that "market forces" and competition will efficiently maximize the quality of educational products. This, in turn, supports the argument that school voucher programs will be good for poor and minority parents, since with competition and market forces operating, educational outcomes will automatically be improved.

But education is not a product that can be bought; it is an activity that requires dedication and devotion on the part of both teachers and students. Teachers are not mere "resources"; they have to care deeply about their vocation. They have to be recruited, developed, and treated well enough for them to want to stay in the profession. Schools are not businesses; they are a crucial part of our democratic social structure. Their function is to turn students into socialized, knowledgeable, thoughtful, socially responsible, cooperative, and effective citizens. Those ends cannot be accomplished by computers and videotapes alone.

To reveal and challenge such existing frames requires a significant research effort. The Strategic Framing Project intends to proceed with this research in a systematic fashion. The progressive moral system has been explicitly described, and contrasted with the conservative moral system, in George Lakoff's *Moral Politics*. Using this analysis as a starting point, we will

provide progressive advocates, policymakers, and media spokespersons with a better sense of what they are up against and how they should frame an alternative. We will provide:

- An understanding of how particular policy proposals fit into an overall system of progressive values.
- An understanding of the often-hidden basis of conservative objections to progressive proposals and why conservatives find progressive policies immoral.

In addition we will provide a way to reclaim morality for progressives, by providing:

- A reframing of progressive policies from a moral perspective.
- An effective and resonant language of progressive values that can be used to justify particular policies.
- A way to reappropriate traditional American virtues for progressives.

The Strategic Framing Project includes four specific parts:

I. Articulating the Language of Progressive Values.

Progressives need an effective language that honestly expresses their values; this is not a question of public relations or spin. It must be a language that is unified, reflects the overall progressive moral and ethical perspective, and resonates with established American virtues. It must provide a coordinated reframing of issues over the entire policy spectrum, and must fit a long-term progressive strategy. We plan to provide a regularly updated Manual for Progressives that can be applied to a range of issues including the environment and education.

II. Reclaiming American Virtues.

The Right has claimed American virtues for its own: not just spiritual and

family values, but personal and civic virtues as well. They have commandeered such virtues as compassion, responsibility, courage, honesty, and even faith, and civic virtues as well: freedom, liberty, the rule of law, citizenship, and patriotism. In the process, they have also reinterpreted foundational American symbols and narratives. The process of reclaiming these values requires careful analysis of how conservatives use them today and comparisons with historical usage. The analysis will provide direction for reasserting basic American values as progressive values.

III. Developing an Integrated Progressive Vision.

Progressive issues are scattered like buckshot. We need an integrated reconceptualization of what progressive politics is about. Starting from nurturant morality and an ethics of care, we will reframe the central issues of progressive thought to suggest future progressive themes and directions for policymaking. For example, we will rethink foreign policy to provide a central role for international moral norms in general, so that human rights, ecological values, and health, will be natural dimensions of foreign policy. Energy policy needs to be reframed from an ecological perspective. Such a rethinking needs to be done over the whole range of issues, providing an integrated view of future progressive themes.

IV. Applying Progressive Values to Food, Water, Shelter, and Related Issues.

Here we move from the conceptual underpinnings of the progressive agenda to a reframing of particular issues and policy recommendations, rethinking the most basic of human needs from the perspective of progressive values. We start with food and water, moving to other basic issues: housing, work, community, and so on. Rethinking of progressive values and themes requires a profound rethinking of how to provide for human needs from the bottom up.

The Strategic Framing Project will move forward on these different fronts by combining fundamental research with applied work that focuses on reframing specific issues. The overarching goal is to create a series of widely distributed publications and an easily replicable training program that can provide activists and policymakers with the tools they need to reclaim language, morality, and political initiative from the right.